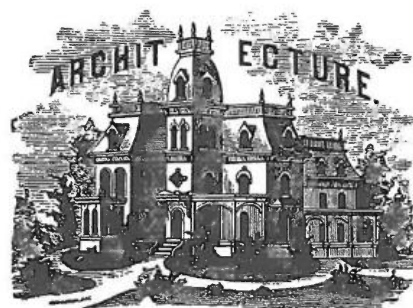


A Biographical Dictionary of Architects in Maine



Samuel Melcher III
1775-1862

Samuel Melcher III was the leading builder in the Brunswick-Topsham area during the first few decades of the nineteenth century. While primarily a housewright and sometime shipwright, he owed his reputation as well to the design and construction of most of the early buildings at Bowdoin College and, especially in later years, to a number of meeting houses in mid-coastal Maine. Like other Maine builders of the period, he had no formal training in architecture. Instead he grew up in a family of housewrights, and he seems to have absorbed at an early age the essentials of Federal period design, probably through books and visits to Boston, Salem, and other cities. By the 1820s and 30s he was employing elements of Greek and Gothic architecture as well. An understanding of Melcher's development and architectural achievement is facilitated by a number of references in the standard Brunswick and Bowdoin College histories, by the preservation of several of his account books in Bowdoin's Special Collections, and by the survival of many of his buildings.¹

Melcher first appears in the records as a builder, apparently with his father Samuel and brother Aaron, of Bowdoin's Massachusetts Hall and the residence of John Dunlap.² (Melcher was designated Samuel III to distinguish him from his father Samuel, Sr., and an older cousin, Samuel II.)³ Massachusetts Hall, begun in 1799 and finished in 1802, is a plain, three storied structure of brick with a hipped roof and a number of Federal style refinements, such as the entrances (Figure 1). A cupola was added a few years later but removed in 1830.⁴ The present roof is a modification of the original resulting from enlargement of the third story in 1873, at which time the four chimneys were also shortened and the ell on the east side raised.⁵ Plain as it is, this structure remains one of the more attractive buildings on the Bowdoin campus, perhaps because of the combination of pleasing proportions and restrained detailing we associate with the best Federal Style architecture.

John Dunlap's residence, on Union Street facing Gilman, was built between 1798 and 1800. Dunlap was the town's wealthiest citizen at the turn of the century and a member of Bowdoin's Governing Boards. He was made building agent for Massachusetts Hall because of his position and experience. Among his business interests was a shipyard at the



Figure 1. Massachusetts Hall, Bowdoin College, Brunswick, c. 1868 view (Courtesy of Special Collections, Hawthorne-Longfellow Library, Bowdoin).

Falls, where he at one time employed both Samuel III and his brother Aaron.⁶ The Dunlap House was a traditional post-Colonial, gabled roof structure with two chimneys and originally little embellishment. The house is mentioned in several places in the Melcher account books, both early and late. Some of the later references pertain to remodeling done in 1830 and 1841, when the house was enlarged, porches and detailing added, and the two front parlors combined into one (Figure 2).

Prosperity resulting from the United States' role as neutral carrier during the Napoleonic Wars created much demand for the services of builders and craftsmen. Samuel Melcher III, 25 years old in 1800 and already known as a skilled carpenter, thus stood to benefit from the on-coming construction boom. During the immediate pre-Embargo years, the buildings which gained Melcher the widest reputation probably were the First Parish Meeting House of 1806-08 at Maine Street and Bath Road and the first Maine Hall of 1806-08 on Bowdoin's campus. Another on-campus example was the first Bowdoin chapel, built in 1805-06. Among the more notable Brunswick and Topsham residences of this period were those Melcher built for President McKeen in 1802-03, Dr. Benjamin Porter in 1802-03, Nathaniel Walker in 1802-03, and Professor Parker Cleaveland in 1805-06.



Figure 2. Greek Revival Detailing on the John Dunlap Barn, Brunswick, 1945 view by Samuel Green (Courtesy of the Author).



Figure 3. Dr. Benjamin Porter House, Topsham, c. 1973 view by John McKee (Courtesy of the Author).

Through about 1803 the Melcher brothers appear to have worked as partners, and both probably deserve credit for the earliest buildings.⁷ From 1805 on, Samuel III was his own boss and employed, at various times, his father, brothers, and a number of younger men who later became well known in their own right, including Anthony C. Raymond, Aaron Dunning, and Richard T. D. Melcher, Samuel III's eldest son.

The Porter, Walker, and Cleaveland Houses represent three interesting but different approaches to Federal period architecture. The main body of the Porter House in Topsham has the shape of a 4x3 rectangle, with hipped roof, two chimneys, and equivalent but not identical left and right wings set back from the front (Figure 3). This appears to have been the most ambitious residence ever undertaken by the Melchers. The principal rooms are very spacious and exhibit a wealth of detailed carving in their cornices and door and fireplace frames⁸ (Figure 4). The Cleaveland House in Brunswick is also a 4x3 rectangle (actually 46x36 feet), but with a long ell extending to the rear. While it has four chimneys in the front rectangle, thus affording a floor plan similar to that of Massachusetts Hall, it is notably lacking in detailed ornamentation, no doubt the result of its first owner being a professor.⁹ Bowdoin College owned the house between 1813 and 1858, but apparently was no more willing than the professor to pay for such ornamentation.¹⁰ The main section of the Walker House in Topsham is more nearly square but, unlike the others, has three stories and a steeply pitched roof with a finely articulated facade. Its interior ornamentation is equivalent to that of Dr. Porter's house, although the rooms are somewhat smaller in scale.¹¹ All three buildings utilize a post Colonial-Federal floor plan having "four-over-four" rooms plus a central hall. Melcher elected, however, to erect a wall about two-thirds of the way through the hall in order to create opposing front and rear staircases, usually with doorways on the main floor and landings.¹² Another Topsham residence, the Holden-Frost House of 1806-07, has a similar staircase and apparently owes much of its interior woodwork to Melcher. The same may be true of the Purington House, also in Topsham.¹³

Melcher's pre-Embargo meeting house and dormitory for Bowdoin utilized, respectively, wood and brick to bring out the best features of Federal Period design. The First Parish Meeting House, while "simple and barnlike" in outline (and probably from within), was a fine study in symmetrical proportions, with a projecting vestibule section surmounted by a pediment and a graceful, but also rather plain tower with belfry and lantern (Figure 5). Like several Maine churches of the period, the design for Brunswick's

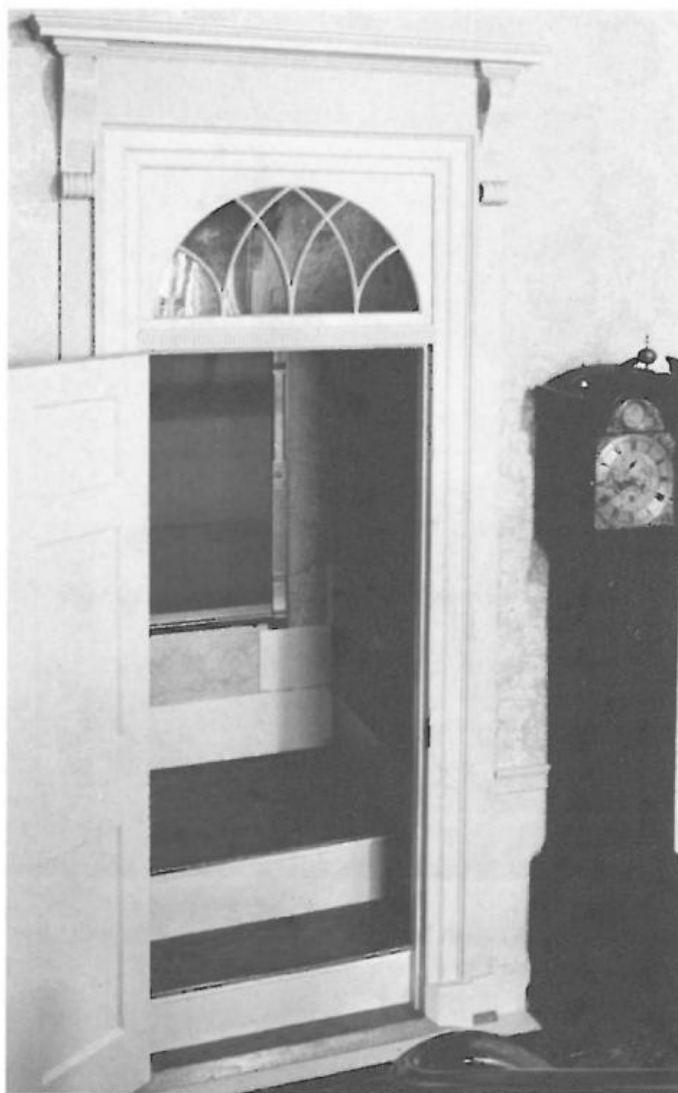


Figure 4. Stair Landing of the Dr. Benjamin Porter House, Topsham, c. 1973 view by John McKee (Courtesy of the Author).

meeting house was based upon Plate 33 of Asher Benjamin's *The Country Builder's Assistant* of 1797. The College contributed funds toward construction in order to have galleries available for students. Growth in the size of the congregation plus an interest in "modern" ideas led to the replacement of this structure by Richard Upjohn's Gothic Revival church in 1845.¹⁴

The first Maine Hall also utilized some essentials of neo-classical design, including a projecting central bay on the long (campus) side with a pediment and fan motif. The entrances, each with its own elliptical light, were also on the long side, and there was an appropriate balustrade surrounding the hipped roof and its six chimneys.¹⁵ An understandable sadness was evident in the "older generation" when this structure was rebuilt by Anthony C. Raymond along simpler lines, with entrances at the ends, after a fire in 1836. These lines, however, make the building very similar to Melcher's Winthrop and Appleton Halls, dating from 1822 and 1843, respectively.

- ⁶ See Trustees' *Records* for 1799 through 1802; also, Melcher's first *Ledger*, 1803-09. Wheeler gives some biographical details, pp. 209-211.
- ⁷ Shipman, *op. cit.*, p. 25 and fn. 32. Aaron tried his hand at farming during the Embargo and moved to Falmouth Fore-side about 1812.
- ⁸ It is more than likely that some, perhaps most, of this ornamentation was not the work of the Melcher brothers. See the discussion in Shipman, *op. cit.*, pp. 21-23.
- ⁹ Shipman, *op. cit.*, pp. 30-34.
- ¹⁰ Numerous references can be found in the Trustees' *Records* to repair and remodelling expense from 1813 on. Indeed, some of the north rooms were not "finished" until 1819, and most of the ell dates from the 1820s.
- ¹¹ Shipman, *op. cit.*, p. 24 and fn. 33.
- ¹² Landings in some of the Topsham houses have beautifully ornamented doorways with fans and, in one case, an angled staircase from landing to second floor. In the Cleaveland House the doors are plain, and both upper staircases are simple returns from their main flights.
- ¹³ For information on the Holden-Frost House, see Shipman, *op. cit.*, pp. 37-39.
- ¹⁴ The history of the 1806 meeting house is given in Thompson Ashby, *A History of the First Parish Church in Brunswick, Maine*, Brunswick, 1969. The calendar notes from March through May, 1937 are especially informative in this regard. See also, Shipman, *op. cit.*, pp. 39-41.
- ¹⁵ Allowance should be made for the possibility that this was not a Melcher-designed building. Given the fragmentary documentation available, however (see Shipman, *op. cit.*, pp. 28-30, especially fn. 40), it appears that Melcher's claim is stronger than others. The balustrade, while appropriate to the design, turned out to be quite inappropriate for both the climate (it acted as a snow fence) and the students' "games".
- ¹⁶ See "Dedication of the First Congregational Church of Wiscasset", pamphlet dated July 27, 1909, Wiscasset Library.
- ¹⁷ This house narrowly escaped demolition at the time Hugh Stubbins' Senior Center was being planned in 1963.
- ¹⁸ The design of this woodwork was provided by Boston architect A. C. Martin.

LIST OF KNOWN COMMISSIONS IN MAINE BY SAMUEL MELCHER III

John Dunlap House, 4 Oak Street, Brunswick, 1798-1800, Altered*
Massachusetts Hall, Bowdoin College, Brunswick, 1799-1802, Altered*
First President's House, Bowdoin College, Brunswick, 1802-03, Destroyed**
Dr. Benjamin Porter House, 26 Elm Street, Topsham, 1802-03, Extant**
Nathaniel Walker House; Melcher Place, Topsham, 1802-03, Extant**

Chapel, Bowdoin College, Brunswick, 1805-06, Destroyed
Prof. Parker Cleaveland House, 75 Federal Street, Brunswick, 1805-06, Extant
Daniel Holden House, 24 Elm Street, Topsham, 1806-07, Interior Improvements, Extant
Rev. Benjamin Titcomb House, 63 Federal Street, Brunswick, 1806-07, Altered
First Parish Meeting House, Maine Street, Brunswick, 1806-08, Destroyed
Maine Hall, Bowdoin College, Brunswick, 1806-08, Rebuilt 1822, Destroyed
Jacob Abbott House, Maine Street, Brunswick, 1807-08, Destroyed
Harris Sanford House, 6 Elm Street, Topsham, 1812-13, Finish Work, Extant
Maine Cotton and Woolen Factory, Brunswick, 1813, Enlarged 1815-16, Destroyed
David Dunlap-Thomas Upham House, 179 Park Row, Brunswick, 1816-18, Extant
Samuel Veazie House, 41 Main Street, Topsham, 1819-20, Extant
Prof. Samuel Newman House, 7 South Street, Brunswick, 1821, Altered
Hezekiah Wyman House, Wyman Corner, Bath, 1821, Destroyed
Academy for Pres. William Allen, Maine Street, Brunswick, 1822, Destroyed
Winthrop Hall, Bowdoin College, Brunswick, 1822, Extant
David Dunlap House, 1 Federal Street, Brunswick, c. 1823, Destroyed
Daniel Stone House, 10 Water Street, Brunswick, 1825, Altered
Benjamin Weld House, 7 Federal Street, Brunswick, c. 1825, Extant
Gov. Robert P. Dunlap House, 27 Federal Street, Brunswick, 1825-26, Enlargement and Finish Work, Altered
Ethan Earle House, 31 Federal Street, Brunswick, 1827, Extant
Packard-Smyth House, 6-8 College Street, Brunswick, 1827, Extant
Nahum Perkins House, 16 Elm Street, Topsham, c. 1830, Extant
Baptist Church, 3 Elm Street, Topsham, 1835, Extant
Congregational Church, Elm Street, Topsham, 1836-37, Destroyed
Baptist Church, Camden, 1837, Destroyed
First Baptist Church, Waldoboro, 1838, Altered
Universalist Church, East Thomaston (Rockland), 1838, Later moved to Vinalhaven, Altered
First Baptist Church, St. George, 1839, Extant
Congregational Church, High Street, Wiscasset, 1839, Destroyed (Rebuilt in 1908-09 similar to Melcher's original church from designs by John Calvin Stevens of Portland)
Post Office, Maine and Pleasant Streets, Brunswick, 1842, Destroyed
A. J. Stone Store, Maine and Mill Streets, Brunswick, 1842, Destroyed
Appleton Hall, Bowdoin College, Brunswick, 1843, Extant

*With Aaron and Samuel Melcher, Sr.

**With Aaron Melcher

Photograph of Samuel Melcher III
Courtesy of the Author

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